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## JANE GREY SWISSHELM: AGITATOR

Into this world of sorrow are born some who can never be content to leave things as they find them; the seers, the prophets, the reformers, all of them discover in their souls something which is out of tune with the particular portion of the universe in which their lot is cast, and strive all their mortal days to bring to the exact degree of tautness the jangling string. Some of them pass into the beyond with the sickening sense that their efforts have been vain; others, perhaps more fortunate, survive to behold their ideas taken up and carried to a certain fruition. But they, in turn, may perceive the ever-renewing breed of the restless seeking to overturn and to reshape even those factors which have escaped the desecrating hand of earlier readjusters. Others, again, are never satisfied with the accomplishment of one change, but turn, impelled by the urge within, to newer fields of contest and perhaps conquest. These stormy petrels of society have a function to perform. To change the figure, they are the gadflies which sting their fellows from their self-content and their easily satisfied desires, prod them till, from very disgust at the importunity, they sluggishly and unwillingly allow themselves to deviate into new and untrodden paths.

Such a soul of revolt was born into the then frontier town of Pittsburgh in 1815. Jane Grey Cannon,<sup>1</sup> daughter of Scotch-Irish Presbyterians who treasured the legends of covenanter

<sup>1</sup> In 1880 Mrs. Swisshelm published the story of her life down to the close of the civil war under the title *Half a century* (Chicago). She states in this work that she wrote from memory, having destroyed all letters and papers lest they be used for some evil purpose. Sketches of her life are found in *Appletons' cyclopædia of American biography*, edited by James G. Wilson and John Fiske (New York, 1887-1889); in William B. Mitchell, *History of Stearns county* (Chicago, 1915), 2: 1080, 1404-1406; in Daniel S. B. Johnston, "Minnesota journalism in the territorial period," in *Minnesota historical collections*, 10 (part 1): 346-347; and in *A history of the republican party from its organization to the present time to which is added a political history of Minnesota from a republican point of view and biographical sketches of leading Minnesota republicans*, published by E. V. Smalley (St. Paul, 1896), 309-311. In the preparation of the present sketch *Half a century* has been much used.

days, was brought up in an atmosphere saturated with the ozone of service and poisoned with the mephitic exhalations of self-immolation and self-repression. Not even the love with which the mother enveloped the household could dissipate all the baleful influences of the less attractive side of Calvinism. Nothing but New England puritanism or covenanter severity can account for a two-year-old conscience "tortured" by the vanity of wearing new red shoes and white stockings "beautifully clocked" at services in a Presbyterian meetinghouse where the sanctuary was never profaned by the singing of "human compositions, but resounded only to the cadence of Rouse's version of David's psalms." Nor otherwise could come easily the morbidity which would force an infant under six years of age to crouch at night by the side of an open grave where lay the body of a woman, three years buried yet in a "wonderful state of preservation," and gaze at the still face in the opened coffin with confident expectation of beholding a supernatural apparition. Years afterwards the experience was described as "inexpressibly grand, solemn and sad. . . . Earth was far away and heaven near at hand, but no ghost came, and I went home disappointed."

Bereft of the head of the house when Jane was seven years old, the Cannon family, back in Pittsburgh, after a few years in the "new village" of Wilkinsburg, had a somewhat difficult time to make an adequate living. To eke out an income Jane was taught lace-making, an art which she, seated on the ample lap of an attentive pupil, passed on to women of the neighborhood. At this mature age she began painting and made a profit by selling the pictures which she produced, once receiving the munificent sum of five dollars from one who was willing to become her patron and finance her education in art. Later, after her marriage, while again dabbling in colors Jane was seized with the conviction that following this avocation was inconsistent with her duties as a wife, and she gave up what she believed was really her calling in life—for writing, wherein she did achieve at least notoriety, never impressed her as a true and satisfying outlet for her soul's expression.

Of course, joining the church was expected of the child, but a suggestion from her mother that she should do so threw her into a panic of doubt and soul-searching. All the torment which an

adolescent could experience was hers, and after a descent into hell she arose "as one from a grave" with the conviction that her petition that "God should write his name upon my forehead, and give me a 'new name' which should mark me as his; and bring William [*her brother who had run away from home, and who subsequently died at New Orleans*] into the fold, and do with me as he would," had been favorably received. She was convinced that she had been chosen — was one of the elect — and this assurance remained with her to her death.

It was while journeying to a private school, a few miles from Pittsburgh, where she spent a few weeks earning her own keep and tuition by teaching the younger children, that she met the man whom she later married, just before she attained the age of twenty-one. James Swisshelm was the son of an old revolutionary soldier. His family was Methodist; his mother was one who " 'lived without sin,' prayed aloud and shouted in meeting," and incidentally dominated her family, even trying to make her new daughter-in-law conform. An alliance between a covenanter Presbyterian and such a man was believed by Jane's mother to be productive of no good, a sound belief, as the years demonstrated. Nevertheless, despite religious incompatibility, the marriage took place and the young couple went to Swisshelm's home to live, for his services were needed there; at least such was his own and the opinion of his mother.

So long as the two families remained together there was little peace. Jane was convinced that mere marriage did not connote absolute self-abnegation. Her husband, strongly supported by his mother, could not see why his wife would not put aside her prejudices and strive to make him happy by doing as he wished. An early conflict grew out of Swisshelm's unquestioned admiration of his wife's abilities: he wanted her to exercise her undoubted talents by preaching in public, as Wesley ordained. "It was a very earnest discussion, and the Bible was on both sides; but I followed the lead of my church, which taught me to be silent. He quoted his preachers, who were in league with him, to get me to give myself to the Lord, help them save souls, by calling on men everywhere to repent; but I was obstinate. I would not get religion, would not preach, would not live with his mother, and stayed with my own." As Mrs. Swisshelm willingly ad-

mitted, their conflicts were all spiritual; "There never was a time when my husband's strong right arm would not be tempered to infantile gentleness to tend me in illness, or when he hesitated to throw himself between me and danger."

The irreconcilable incompatibility of the two is illustrated by a trivial affair following a sojourn in Louisville, and after Mrs. Swisshelm had returned to Pennsylvania. James sold out an unfortunate commercial enterprise for "a panther, two bears, and a roll of 'wild-cat money.' " He delighted in his domination over the panther, while his wife lived in mortal terror of the animal; and yet it was not until her life, as well as the lives of others, had been narrowly threatened by this beast more than once that he was induced to part with it. Apparently he was utterly at a loss to understand his wife's timidity.

The stay in Louisville impressed an indelible stamp upon the after career of Mrs. Swisshelm. There she saw slavery in some of its worst aspects—saw it as it is depicted in works of the type of Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's cabin*. A hatred of the institution had been implanted in her by a clergyman in early days, but it was not until after her first-hand experience in a state where slaveholding was legal that she became a white-hot torch of abolition. It was then that she was impressed by the slaveholder as the beast she delighted to picture in the scathing denunciations which appeared in her later writings. In Kentucky she found the "advance guard of a great army of woman-whippers, which stretched away back to the Atlantic and around the shores of the Gulf of Mexico, and that they were on duty as a staring brigade, whose business it was to insult every woman who ventured on the street without a male protector, by a stare so lascivious as could not be imagined on American soil. I learned that they all lived, in whole or in part, by the sale of their own children and the labor of the mothers extorted by the lash. . . . I learned that none of the shapely hands displayed on the black vests had ever used other implement of toil than a pistol, bowie-knife or slave-whip; that any other tool would ruin the reputation of the owner of the taper digits; but they did not lose caste by horse-whipping the old mammies from whose bosoms they had drawn life in infancy."

Jane Swisshelm apparently never knew that there was another

type of slaveholder—the man who did not love the institution for itself but who was unable to see how southern society could exist with a large negro population in its midst in other than a state of bondage. She never believed that there was a man who owned slaves and at the same time was considerate of them and of his fellow men of a lighter hue; who ruled his estate as a patriarch of old and, when he died, went to his grave lamented alike by bond and free. The unquestioned softer side of southern life never came beneath her gaze, and it is much to be doubted whether she could have seen anything there which did not fit into the picture she had drawn for herself in those unhappy days in Louisville, had she been allowed to have a wider experience. Pursuit and capture of fugitive slaves on the soil of free states, both before and after the enactment of the law of 1850, but confirmed her in her fixed idea.

It was after Mrs. Swisshelm's return to Pittsburgh, occasioned by the fatal illness of her mother, that she first appeared in print, anonymously, in an attack upon capital punishment. Two years later, in 1842, after she and her husband had returned to the farm in Pennsylvania, she began writing stories and poems, over the name "Jennie Deans," for *The Dollar Newspaper* and *Neal's Saturday Gazette*. Abolition articles and thoughts on woman's rights were published in Fleece's *Spirit of Liberty*, of Pittsburgh. Here again the inability of Mrs. Swisshelm and her husband to see eye to eye is evidenced, for he was wroth that she concealed her identity: If she were not ashamed of her production, why did she not sign her name?

Nevertheless, at this time things were in the way of progressing smoothly between Jane and her husband, when Swisshelm's mother went to live with the young people; and thereafter it was a case of constant friction, the principal cause of which seems to have been jealousy on the part of the elder woman, who resented the influence Mrs. Swisshelm exercised over her husband and others. Twice did things arrive at such a pass that Jane left Swisshelm, determined never to return, but in each case a reconciliation was effected.

The Mexican war came and went, affording additional texts for the nearly weekly essays and sermons which Mrs. Swisshelm wrote in the intervals between teaching school and attending to

household duties. During this time she emerged from anonymity when there appeared in the *Pittsburgh Gazette* a "hexameter rhyme half a column long" flaying the Methodist preachers who lent adhesion to the "Black Gag" rule adopted by a conference of their church in 1840, which forbade "colored members of the church to give testimony in church-trials against white members, in any state where they were forbidden to testify in courts."

Like most of the abolitionist papers, the *Spirit of Liberty* did not live many years; but after its decease the *Pittsburgh Commercial Journal*, edited by Robert M. Riddle, served as an avenue through which Mrs. Swisshelm could find her public after it had printed a letter of hers, with, however, an editorial disclaimer. The editor, a whig, had antislavery proclivities, and so the more willingly gave a place to diatribes against the war, slavery, and kindred subjects. "My style," Mrs. Swisshelm later wrote of these, "I caught from my crude, rural surroundings, and was familiar to the unlearned, and I was not surprised to find the letters eagerly read. The *Journal* announced them the day before publication, the newsboys cried them, and papers called attention to them, some by daring to endorse, but more by abusing Mr. Riddle for publishing such unpatriotic and 'incendiary rant.'"

Out of her own difficulties in securing for herself and from her husband certain property left her by her mother came a series of letters on married woman's right to hold property. After discoursing on general principles she seized upon a flagrant case which stirred the community and so held up existing laws to public scorn that she was in part instrumental in securing a change in the statutes of Pennsylvania, making it possible for a woman to acquire and hold property in her own name. It was this campaign which brought Mrs. Swisshelm an acquaintance with Edwin M. Stanton, then a young Pittsburgh lawyer.

An abolitionist paper, however, was needed. The *Albatross*, started in Pittsburgh in the fall of 1847, was going on the rocks, and its demise would leave the liberty party without an organ in western Pennsylvania, a calamity tantamount to the disintegration of the organization in that region. A sudden and unconsidered suggestion from Mrs. Swisshelm that she might start a paper of her own met with approval and the *Pittsburgh Sat-*

*urday Visiter* (Mrs. Swisshelm insisted on the *e*) was the result. For several years this sheet was issued, bearing the impress of its editor from heading to last column, with much of its news and practically all its editorial material from her pen. From first to last it was an organ for the denunciation of slavery and occasionally a mouthpiece for the advocacy of woman's rights. It flung its blows right and left, not unconsidered, but with the intention of hitting every head which appeared. Its circulation grew until it was one of the best known of the abolitionist newspapers. Like Garrison with his *Liberator*, Mrs. Swisshelm was not content in reaching only those who relished its pungent paragraphs, but she placed on its mailing list editors and prominent people all over the country. It penetrated the south and stung to fury those who saw themselves and their institutions attacked, so often without justice. Its influence was wider than its circulation, for it was quoted extensively either to praise or to condemn. A woman was publishing a newspaper and that added to the anger of many.

"A woman has started a political paper! A woman! Could he [*an editor*] believe his eyes? A woman! Instantly he sprang to his feet and clutched his pantaloons, shouted to the assistant editor, when he, too, read and grasped frantically at his cassimeres, called to the reporters and pressmen and typos and devils, who all rushed in, heard the news, seized their nether garments and joined the general chorus, 'My breeches! Oh, my breeches!'"

One of the bold men who ventured a somewhat pointed remonstrance and, in the course of a two-thirds-column article stated that Mrs. Swisshelm was "a man all but the pantaloons," was answered in a rime which turned the laugh upon him. This man, George D. Prentice, editor of the *Louisville Journal*, had many a tilt with his female opponent, of which a little interchange in 1859, when Mrs. Swisshelm was editing the *St. Cloud Democrat*, is a sample. One or two opening passes brought from Prentice this invitation:

"My pretty Jane, my dearest Jane,  
Ah, never look so shy,  
But meet me in the sanctum, Jane,  
When the flagon's filled with rye;"



and from Mrs. Swisshelm, this acceptance:

“Will darling Georgy, norgy, porgy —  
 My sweety, chicky chaw —  
 He two 'pooneys in him's flagon  
 Or two roundy bits of straw;  
 Or dip him's brighty beak in  
 And eat him's ryey raw?

In plain prose: Will that rye be made into mush? If so, couldn't you add a little 'lasses? or into coffee, when, as you have no cups, we would want two straws, or are we going to take our rye hen-fashion and whole?"<sup>2</sup>

Among the earliest results of the *Visiter's* tactics was a threatened libel suit growing out of an attack upon a federal district judge for his conduct of a case wherein a man was charged with harboring a fugitive slave. A week or so after the trial Mrs. Swisshelm stated that she had been long seeking a great legal luminary of the Pennsylvania heavens which had suddenly disappeared; after looking for it diligently through the best telescopes obtainable, she suddenly bethought herself of Paddy's gun barrel which he had twisted so that he might shoot around corners. "Paddy's idea was so excellent that I adopted it and made a crooked telescope, by which I found that luminary almost sixty degrees below our moral horizon." The anger of the good judge brought forth an "Apology," in which she stated that she would gladly be sent to Mount Airy, the county jail, because its elevation would make it an admirable observatory where she could use her telescope to better advantage. Judge Grier did not prosecute the suit for libel, and no longer played with fire, as is evidenced by a reputed remark of a lawyer engaged to defend another harbinger of fugitive slaves. When it was suggested to him that Mrs. Swisshelm should be brought as a witness, he is alleged to have said: "Oh bring her by all

<sup>2</sup> A week or so later Mrs. Swisshelm closed the interchange of amenities with the following: "GEORGE D. PRENTICE. — This gentlemen and ourself have been having an 'old hen' confab; and we should have been glad to continue it *ad infinitum*, had he been pleased to be either witty or severe; but he has got into a barrell of 'treacle,' and is all sticky, and soft, and smeary and disgusting, Bah! He surely did not know we were subject to sever [*sic*] attacks of Nuralgia [*sic*] of the stomach, or he would not have run the risk of throwing us into vomiting which no medical skill could arrest." *St. Cloud Democrat*, October 27, 1859.

means. No matter what she knows, or whether she knows anything; bring her into court and I'll win the case for you. Grier is more afraid of her than the devil."

While editing the *Visiter*, Mrs. Swisshelm wished to go to Washington at the time the question of the disposition of the territories taken from Mexico was uppermost in the country. An inquiry addressed to Horace Greeley brought her an offer of five dollars a column for Washington letters for his *Tribune*, so that the financial side of the pilgrimage was attended to. At the national capital she was brought in contact with many of the great personages of the day; she won the privilege of a seat in the reporters' gallery of the senate chamber, hitherto reserved for the exclusive use of masculine scribblers; and she brought gladness to the hearts of the thousands of readers of Greeley's "Bible" with her spicy letters describing persons and events, and commenting upon life in general.

No better illustration of the obsession regarding slavery which dominated Mrs. Swisshelm is found than in her poisoned view of every notable individual connected with the great struggle of 1850. Tales which passed current among many of the more hopeless type of abolitionists she seized upon as examples of the depravity of the whole tribe of slaveholders: that of President Tyler's selling a daughter into slavery because she tried to run away with and marry the man she loved; that of the profligacy of Henry Clay; and that of fleeing slaves seeking death in the Potomac rather than suffer capture and return to servitude. She smacked her lips over the yarn that President Taylor was put out of the way because he opposed the new fugitive-slave law: "He ate a plate of strawberries, just as President Harrison had done when he stood in the way of Southern policy, and like his great predecessor Taylor died opportunely, when Mr. Filmore became President, and signed the bill."

But of all the examples of depravity the case which interested her most was a "family of eight mulattoes, bearing the image and superscription of the great New England statesman, who paid the rent and grocery bills of their mother as regularly as he did those of his wife." After much hesitation she decided to show to New Englanders the "true" picture of their idol, Daniel Webster, and wrote the yarn in a letter to the *Tribune* which

that paper published but for which it later apologized. This exposé, she was convinced, was the real cause of Webster's defeat for the whig nomination in 1852, and she stated that Henry Wilson, a senator from Massachusetts and the author of *The history of the rise and fall of slave power in America*, assured her, on the occasion of the free democratic convention of that year, that her letter, rather than the "seventh of March" speech, or the Ashburton treaty of 1842, was the real reason for Webster's rejection.

About 1852 the *Visiter* was amalgamated with the weekly *Journal*, making a combination, under the name *Family Journal and Visiter*, with which Mrs. Swisshelm continued her editorial connection until March, 1857. Not long after this she took the step on which she had long been pondering. Her marriage had been a failure, "productive of mutual injury." For her it had meant twenty years "without the legal right to be alone one hour—to have the exclusive use of one foot of space—to receive an unopened letter, or to preserve a line of manuscript

'From sharp and sly inspection.' "

For her husband it had been a deprivation, since it had prevented his having a wife "who could pad the matrimonial fetters with those devices by which husbands are managed." To a formal separation Swisshelm would not listen. Plain desertion was then the only recourse. Accordingly, after a sharp struggle to secure her personal and separate property, Mrs. Swisshelm took her infant daughter and set out for St. Paul in May, 1857, intending to take up life anew near St. Cloud on land secured through her brother-in-law who, with her sister, had some time since gone to live in that new village of Minnesota.

The idyllic existence to which she looked forward could not be, since danger of Indian attacks made it madness to attempt to live beyond the protection of the settlement: "My cabin perished in a night, like Jonah's gourd—perished that liberty might be crushed in Kansas; for without a garrison at Fort Ripley, my project was utterly insane."

In St. Cloud itself, then, Mrs. Swisshelm settled, but not to bury in the past the struggle against slavery which she had been waging for years; for slavery, negro slavery, she found

in Minnesota. Even then the agreeable summers of this northern region tempted men of means to come from the southland with retinues of domestic servants to avoid discomfort and pestilence with which every returning hot season scourged plantation and town in the lower Mississippi valley. In Minneapolis and St. Anthony, on the shores of Lake Minnetonka, southern families summered as regularly as the seasons revolved.

In St. Cloud Mrs. Swisshelm found not merely transient visitors, but a permanent resident, "General" Sylvanus B. Lowry, son of a Tennessean who had been missionary, agent, and finally superintendent of manual-labor schools among the Winnebago. The "general," whose title was derived from the fact that he had once been attorney-general of the territory, was the democratic boss of northern Minnesota. He "lived in a semi-barbaric splendor, in an imposing house on the bank of the Mississippi, where he kept slaves, bringing them from and returning them to his Tennessee estate, at his convenience, and no man saying him nay." His sway was well-nigh despotic: "Republicans on their arrival in his dominion, were converted to the Democratic faith, fast as sinners to Christianity in a Maffitt meeting, and those on whom the spirit fell not, kept very quiet. People had gone there to make homes, not to fight the Southern tiger, and any attempt against such overwhelming odds seemed madness, for Lowry's dominion was largely legitimate. He was one of those who are born to command—of splendid physique and dignified bearing, superior intellect and mesmeric fascination." With Jane Grey Swisshelm and General Lowry in one town there were bound to be happenings of interest.

The opportunity for a clash was not slow in arriving. Deprived of her dream of a farm home, Mrs. Swisshelm accepted an invitation to take charge of a newly established paper and "take town lots for a salary." She changed the name of the paper to the *St. Cloud Visiter*, appealed through its columns and personally to all the leading personages of the town for support, and was assured of the backing of the community, even to General Lowry himself, who responded by writing, "I myself will give the *St. Cloud Visiter* a support second to no paper in the territory, if it will support Buchanan's administration." To the astonishment of all who learned of it, Mrs. Swisshelm

agreed to the terms. Her brother-in-law, when told that the rumor was true, "said bad words, rushed from the room and slammed the door."

Soon an issue of the *Visiter* showed Lowry how his bargain was to work.<sup>3</sup> Stating that the paper would support Buchanan's administration, the leading editorial of three and one-half columns went on to tell what that administration stood for—the establishment of slavery in every state and territory, making good Toombs' boast that he would call the roll of his slaves at the foot of Bunker hill. Northern "mudsills" were talking of voting themselves farms, but they would much better vote themselves kind masters, such as southern laborers had, and Buchanan and the *Visiter* were working together to that end. Lowry was probably grieved; unquestionably he was angry. He sent word that such things must cease or the consequences would be fatal. The next issue of the *Visiter* traced the course by which it had become a supporter of the administration and of a policy long opposed by the editor: General Lowry, accustomed to buying lands and people, had bought her and she proposed to earn the support which he promised by being Mr. Buchanan's most enthusiastic supporter, "indeed . . . his only honest supporter"; for while some pretended otherwise, the sole object of his administration was the perpetuation and spread of slavery, and this object the *Visiter* would support with the best arguments in its power.

Then action became perceptibly accelerated. A speech by Lowry's lawyer, Shepley, on the place of woman; an editorial praising the lecture but calling attention to the omission in his classification of types of the gambling woman not unknown even in Minnesota in the fifties; the lawyer's pretense that this was an allusion to his wife; General Lowry's rush to the defense of an abused lady; and a decision to mob the paper and its editor, all came in rapid succession. St. Cloud, however, would stand for no such method of breaking up a fair fight. Nevertheless, by night, three men broke into the printing establishment, smashed the press, scattered the type, some in the river and some on the road, and so sought to put an end to the whole

<sup>3</sup> The issue of February 18, 1858, contains the mock defense of Buchanan and the explanation of the *Visiter's* position.

issue.<sup>4</sup> This aroused the indignation of the portion of the populace inclining to Mrs. Swisshelm's way of thinking; a public meeting, where she gave an account of the whole affair, produced resolutions of support; subscriptions were taken, a company was formed to reestablish the paper, and new equipment was rushed from Chicago.

When the *Visiter* was reestablished in the middle of May, 1858, there was no pretense of supporting Buchanan, for the paper came out as a republican organ of the abolitionist school. A printed story of the act of vandalism brought a libel suit. Thereupon Mrs. Swisshelm persuaded the backers of her sheet, much against their will, to yield and give bond in the sum of \$10,000 to retract the statement and promise never to use the *Visiter* as a political organ. One more issue, got out by the boys in the office, appeared, and the *Visiter* was no more. The next week brought no paper on the regular day of publication and great was the rejoicing of the forces who thought the discordant element had been removed from their tranquil settlement. But on the following day the *St. Cloud Democrat*, with Mrs. Swisshelm its sole owner and editor, made its bow to an astounded public.<sup>5</sup>

From 1858 until early in 1863 Mrs. Swisshelm scolded, praised, and generally guided St. Cloud, Minnesota, and the nation generally in the way they should go. Slavery, with its evils, was by far the most important issue displayed for condemnation, but it would be wearisome to go into the details of this fight. The paper generally supported the republican party, but it was not partisan in the strict sense of the word. Whenever the leaders of that new organization showed signs of yielding to expediency for political ends, they might have felt the lash of a mordant tongue as keenly as the most rabid southern democrat. Lincoln's nomination by the Chicago convention was greeted with no enthusiasm. Indeed, it was not till late and never with

<sup>4</sup> The *Visiter* for May 13, 1859, contains the story of the raid.

<sup>5</sup> This is an epitome of the somewhat dramatic presentation given in *Half a century*. Actually the chronology is slightly different. The last issue before the raid was on April 1; publication was resumed on May 13; the number for June 24, still bearing the old name, contained the announcement of the change of ownership and half a column of defiance to Mrs. Swisshelm's enemies. The issue got out by the boys was dated July 22, there having been none for about a month. The first number of the *Democrat* was dated August 5.

full approbation that Mrs. Swisshelm could lend her pen to support what she was pleased to call that president's truckling dealing with the crisis he was called to face. For a long time she was convinced that he was dominated by the proslavery border-state element. She poured the vials of her wrath upon his head when he took the ground that union forces were not to be used to assist negro slaves to escape from their masters. She condemned his reversing of Frémont's proclamation in Missouri. For what was the war being fought if not to put an end to slavery?

Late in 1861 her comments on Lincoln's first annual show her stand: "Our readers will regret, with us that while the world has been moving at railroad speed, for the past year, our good President has been fast anchored to that blessed, old, slave-catching Inaugural! No matter that slave-holders have been, all that time, using our armies to catch and return their slaves while the slaves have been used as the indispensable means of defeating our armies and destroying our government, Mr. Lincoln once recognized, and enlarged upon his presidential and constitutional duty of nigger-catching, as the one thing needful, and let the world wag as it will, or jog on if it likes Mr. Lincoln is going to be consistent with Mr. Lincoln, now! 'that's so.' No matter if the world moves to Jerico, he is going to stay and catch those niggers—'he is, certain.' " While the recognition of Haiti was some advance, on the whole "all else is contemptible in matter and manner. It is more like the production of a provincial lawyer, than the Commander-in-chief of the armies of a great nation, at war for existence."<sup>6</sup>

When slavery was abolished in the District of Columbia, in the spring of 1862, Mrs. Swisshelm began to feel that Abe Lincoln and not Kentucky was in the saddle. But such approval as that might bring was tempered soon by Lincoln's abrogation of General Hunter's proclamation abolishing slavery in his district. The discharge of McClellan as a "stick-in-the-mud" was applauded; yet a few days later she summed up the record of the administration for its first twenty months by stating:

True, he has discharged Mr. McClellan, that arch traitor who for sixteen months has fought the battles of the Confederacy

<sup>6</sup> *St. Cloud Democrat*, December 12, 1861.

within the Union lines but he did it a full twelve months after he must have known him to be at least incompetent. He has issued his proclamation of Emancipation, to take effect sixteen months after he turned back the tide of popular sentiment by revoking that of General Frémont; and if he is thus to be always a year or more behind the flood tide of time he might as well remain stationary.

He is now in a position which eighteen months ago would have saved the nation but there is no assurance that his action is not too late; and there are but two things he could do either of which would give us confidence in the future of our Government — Resign or Die.<sup>7</sup>

When secession was actually in progress, Mrs. Swisshelm went with Greeley in saying, not sadly as did the bearded prophet of the *Tribune*, but blithely, "Let the erring sisters depart in peace."<sup>8</sup> From this position she swung to the ground that the south was too cowardly to fight; it could whip negro women, but could not stand up to men. Then, when the war was actually in progress, she was, true to her nature, all for action; one after another of the union military leaders fell under her disapprobation; either they were cowardly, or, more probably, they were poisoned with the virus of southern sympathy.

It should not be thought that, in the general national crisis, smaller issues were forgotten. General Lowry was for a long time an object of Mrs. Swisshelm's attention, particularly when in 1859 he was run by the Minnesota democrats for lieutenant governor against Ignatius Donnelly on the republican ticket.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>7</sup> *St. Cloud Democrat*, November 20, 1862.

<sup>8</sup> "The idea of getting up a civil war in order to compel the weaker States to remain in the Union, appears to us, horrible in the last degree. Threats of force are wicked and monstrous, as tending to exasperate a set of men little better than maniacs now. Let the North show a prompt willingness to make a fair and equitable settlement with the seceding States, and set them at rest about arming the States to repel Northern coercion and we shall have comparative quiet. We can see no good reason why the two confederacies should not live in as much harmony, at least, as that which has existed for some time past or is likely to do in the future, as members of the same nation." *Ibid.*, November 11, 1860.

<sup>9</sup> In 1862, when Donnelly was running for congress, Mrs. Swisshelm wrote him the following letter, the original of which is among the Donnelly manuscripts, owned by the Minnesota historical society. The letter is dated August 13.

Hon Ignacius Donnelly

Dear Sir

I write to say, privately, what it is not politic to urge in public viz. that I think your friends make a great mistake in taking your election as a foregone conclusion.



But in 1862, when the general became insane, she publicly announced that had people known his true condition, large allowance would have been made; for a man "struggling with the demon of hereditary insanity" there should have been nothing but "deep commiseration." Had his affliction been realized all would have felt the necessity of helping him, and would have borne with his weakness. "We recognize now," she continued, "the secret of that strange mesmeric influence he has exercised over those with whom he came in personal contact. It was

There is much dissatisfaction with the course of the National Administration—it so utterly fails to touch the heart of the people, that the masses are seized with apathy. You have to contend against the glaring fact that those who worked hardest to secure the election of your predecessor, and that administration, have been gen[er]ally overlooked in the press of the battle, and the Govnt patronage bestowed upon open enemies or doubtful friends, & against the strained efforts of the revived democracy, backed by the Volunteer system which draws off loyal men and leaves the rogues. If you are elected it will be after one of the hardest campaigns you have ever been through, or so it appears to me. If I could heartily support your opponent I should, in any event, expect some patronage, for the democrats reward their friends, the Republicans, their enemies. Major Cullen has large local interests here, & neutral people feel that to oppose him is to oppose our own local interests. He is one of my most liberal patrons & has been for years. I have disregarded my own pecuniary interests in time past, have served the Republican Party without money and without price, because there was a principle involved; but, as the present contest is, in reality for the U. S. Senatorship & that contest is between Rice and Aldrich & I should have to toss up a copper to choose between them I shall not oppose my patrons & and deprive my child of the means of education. I think you are much better qualified for Congress than Cullen & that Rice would make a better senator than Aldrich. So you are crossed, your platform is weak, Cullen's is wicked; but he gives me reason to believe he does not stand on it but agrees with Rice. You need the DEMOCRAT. To it you owe most of your popularity in this region, for it has persistently kept you before the people. I shall stop working sixteen hours a day to win office for people who give all their patronage to enemies. But Will Mitchell [*Mrs. Swisshelm's nephew*] is young and green (?), and wants badly to tear Cullen's platform to splinters. He would buy me out if he were able. I will take \$1000 dollars [*sic*], half on delivery & the other on time. Or, I will do the best I can to [*illegible*] your election, *if you pay me fair living wages* or guarantee me in case you are elected some sufficient remuneration in the form of such public printing as I am justly entitled to, I shall place your name at the heads of my columns at any rate. It was forgotten last week in the rush of late news by the mail the night before; but more than this I cannot do in justice to those in my employ, unless you and your party help to sustain the paper. Kindest respects to Mrs Donnelly & in any case I am

Your Friend and Wellwisher

JANE G. SWISSHELM

On the back of the letter Donnelly made this indorsement: "Ans if elected would be glad to do anything in my power. Poor, or would do something at once."

the fitful self-assertion of a large, generous, genial soul, which has gone haltingly through this life, crippled by its clay fetters; but which will as certainly reach the object of its creation—the influence and happiness it was made to enjoy, as it is certain that even in the material economy of nature, nothing is ever suffered to go to waste.” It was while she was on sick leave from Washington, in September, 1863, that she last saw the general. He was then enjoying one of the moments of lucidity which occasionally came to him, and in the course of the conversation he said to her:

I am the only person who ever understood you. People now think that you go into the hospitals from a sense of duty; from benevolence, like those good people who expect to get to heaven by doing disagreeable things on earth; but I know you go because you must; go for your own pleasure; you do not care for heaven or anything but yourself. . . .

You take care of the sick and wounded, go into all those dreadful places just as I used to drink brandy—for sake of the exhilaration it brings you.

And who will say that the general did not hit at least a portion of the truth, not alone in the case of this restless woman, but in that of many another agitator who seeks to redirect in some degree the progress of society?

All was grist that came to Mrs. Swisshelm’s mill: sickness and its proper treatment; the conduct of schools; woman’s dress; social diversion. On one point, at any rate, the bringing-up of this woman had not been hedged about by puritanical narrowness, and this was with respect to dancing. She believed it a wholesome and harmless amusement, not merely to be tolerated but to be extolled as a positive good. Once she was taken to task by a good sister who, in a letter which was printed in the *Democrat*, rebuked the “sister” who not long before had been “speaking words of the most solemn import at a dying bed,” for lending the approval of her presence at a dancing party. What wonder that God was visiting his people with sore afflictions when the dance hall was frequented “not only by the young and thoughtless, but by those who form public opinion, and profess to believe in Religion!”

“The business of dying,” came the rejoinder, “will be time enough when it comes. . . . We have never met an instance

of a person whom we could think dancing had unfitted for dying: have nothing in our experience to show that it takes us further away from the contemplation of sacred things than does singing or sailing, running or laughing.”<sup>10</sup>

She contrasted dancing with the “plays” with which godly people were wont to solace their lighter moments: “The clergy and church members generally have a special aversion to dancing, that is, to men and women, or boys and girls dancing together, provided the amusement end in dancing. But they may go through any number of dancing figures and motions to the sound of music and it is all right, provided it be topped off with promiscuous kissing . . . what led us to propose dancing in St. Cloud as an evening amusement was to have it take the place of those kissing rough and tumbles out of which a lady was fortunate if she came with whole clothes; and it has, in a great measure superseded them; but still the children of our extra pious people meet at an evening party, the scenes of the baboon’s wedding are reënacted.”<sup>11</sup>

Editorial duties were occasionally relieved by a lecture tour extending through the towns of Minnesota and even into the adjoining states. Woman’s rights were ordinarily the subject of her talks, although slavery was not entirely overlooked. Wherever she went a good audience was assured,<sup>12</sup> and the people of

<sup>10</sup> *St. Cloud Democrat*, December 27, 1866.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, April 4, 1861. The good sister’s biblical reference in the earlier issue was not allowed to pass without attention: “We are gravely asked what we should think of an account of one of the Apostles whirling Mary Magdalene around a room in a waltz. Well what would we all think of a description of Peter kneeling on one knee in the center of a room half full of people and taking Mary Magdalene on the other knee and kissing her twenty times to pay a forfeit and redeem his pocket knife? What should we think of the whole posy of them going through the march quadrille to the tune of ‘Dear Sister Phoebe,’ while Mary the mother of James went around the room and kissed every man in it by way of amusing the company?”

<sup>12</sup> After a lecture in St. Paul on women’s, particularly married women’s, rights, the local critic cast his comments in the form of a breakfast chat with Mrs. Critic. The latter resented his likening Mrs. Swisshelm to Shylock, whereupon he said: “As I anticipated, my dear, you are thinking of Shylock’s inhumanity to Antonio in the celebrated trial scene. Now mind, I am not making Shylock immaculate—he unquestionably had human nature on his own eloquent showing, and unregenerate of course. I am only bound to show, before the toast gets cold, that you, as the sympathizer and friend of Mrs. Swisshelm, ought not to object to a comparison with the grand central figure of Shakspear’s tale. And right here—in this trial scene—

St. Cloud were sure to find in their weekly paper animated accounts of what she saw and heard—everything from political gossip to accounts of the hotels where she stopped and descriptions of the dress and household management of women who entertained her.<sup>13</sup>

When the civil war was in progress Minnesota politics and small-town doings ceased to afford sufficient outlet for the pent-up energy of Jane Swisshelm's active mind and hand, and so she sold her paper and betook herself to Washington. There, after casting about for something to do, and incidentally meeting again her friend Stanton, the president, and particularly Mrs. Lincoln, with whom there sprang up a close friendship which lasted to her death, she found employment in nursing the wounded. Here, at least, was a chance to do and do again. Overcoming the disadvantage of being a woman and of being unconnected with some regular organization, she became a free lance and sought and found the worst hospitals, the most severe cases, and the most desperate need. For Miss Dorothea Dix, that woman's rights champion and organizer of a considerable portion of the sick-and-wounded relief of the war, she had small regard. Miss Dix was cold and unsympathetic, all for organization, order, and neatness, let the results be what they might. It is, indeed, a quite different picture than we are accustomed to find of the philanthropist who was instrumental in improving the conditions in prisons, insane asylums, and poorhouses, that Mrs. Swisshelm presents to us. Position meant nothing to her, unless

the analogy between the performances in the Venitian court chamber and Ingersoll Hall, strikes me most forcibly. Shylock would cut his pound of flesh—it was his own, his right, his revenge. Now think of Mrs. Swisshelm's plea for the justifiable homicide of husbands—the suppressed and terrible energy with which she reached the climax when she would 'tranfix her tyrant.' Now all that I say is, that Judge Palmer would be puzzled to settle accounts between the wronged Hebrew in the play, and the wronged wife of Mrs. Swisshelm's portraiture from real life." *St. Paul Press*, quoted in the *St. Cloud Democrat*, February 6, 1862.

<sup>13</sup> "The Governor's house is a model of home comfort, and small elegancies, showing plain, good sense, and artistic taste in the mistress of the establishment. There is a piano, books, pictures, photographs of distinguished persons &c. — Eureka! Dinner without sauce plates. Oh, dear, but it was a relief to our meat and all the vegetables and sauce to be eaten with it, on a large plate, to be disposed of at leisure and not be required to take charge of half a dozen plates, one of fowl and potatoes, one of oysters, one of cranberry, one of cabbage, one of tomato, &c., &c., and so on according to our St. Cloud company programme." Editorial correspondence from St. Paul, in the *St. Cloud Democrat*, February 6, 1862.

she could utilize it; great reputations were as nothing in comparison to her first-hand impressions.

From along in 1863 to the end of the war nursing kept her busy, but when the war was ended something must be found to do. Again Secretary Stanton assisted her by giving her a position as a clerk in his department. What she saw and experienced produced many letters, of which some, particularly those on the question of women in industry, appeared in the *New York Tribune*. Washington, she opined, was the worst place in the country to give this comparative innovation a fair trial; there was no test of fitness before appointment; the male employees were unable to realize that women were trying to earn a living and thought that they must all be treated as "ladies" in a drawing-room. Some women would work and some would not; too many were in the latter category, so that Secretary Harlan solved the problem by turning them all out, neither a just nor a manly way of deciding the issue, according to Mrs. Swisshelm.

The issues raised by reconstruction were naturally a subject of close attention for this woman who had been fighting the southerner and slavery all her days. It was not in her that a prostrate people would find a defender, hence the attempts of President Johnson to put brakes on a radical congress brought down upon his devoted head the invective which she felt was deserved. Since there was no paper ready to be a medium for her own ideas—certainly not for all of them—there was nothing to do but start another, and so the *Reconstructionist* was born. While the utterances of its editor no doubt found a responsive echo in the breast of Thaddeus Stevens, the short-tempered man in the White House was not the sort to brook such emanations from a mere clerk in one of his executive departments, and so he took the emphatic but unfortunate course of dismissing her incontinently, discharging her directly without taking the trouble of having Stanton do it for him. Yet one finds it hard to censure his course after reading the article which provoked it:

When President Lincoln was murdered nearly all loyal people believed that the South had made a serious mistake. A very few thought otherwise. Of these, two said to us: "You are mistaken. They know what they are about. Andy Johnson is their tool."

The thought was too horrible to be entertained. It was too dreadful to believe that the man who had just received such marks of confidence from the loyal millions was simply a skillful actor playing patriot the better to serve the cause of treason. But these shrewd prophets shook their heads and said:

“You will see.”

One thing was certain. The morning of the inauguration he was drinking freely with blatant Copperheads. . . .

The business was to get the President, and they got him. That it was the South which nominated him through indirect influence—that Mr. Johnson labored cunningly for that nomination by boisterous professions of loyalty, and the thrusting forward of ultra pledges designed to be broken, there is no longer any doubt. That he was prepared beforehand to serve the purposes of treason there can be no doubt; that his administration and its programme were part and parcel of the assassination plot, we have no longer the shadow of a doubt.

This does not make it necessary that he should have known of the intended assassination. We do not think that either Tyler or Fillmore knew that the men who used them intended murdering Harrison and Taylor; but in all these cases the assassins knew their men; and these three Presidents, made Presidents by assassination, are each, with their administrations, as much incidents of the rebellion—emanations from the brain of the arch-fiends and wholesale murderers who plotted that rebellion, as was the starvation of our men at Andersonville, or the poisoning of our armies. Whether known or unknown to Mr. Johnson, his veto message is the further unfolding of the assassination plot.

That assassination was a change of base in the traitor war for the destruction of the Union. The veto is the Sumter guns of this second era of the war, and it will probably be followed by a Bull Run and Ball’s Bluff—by disaster and perhaps apparent defeat to the loyal millions whose weapons are once more turned upon them by their trusted agents. Andrew Johnson has his plans matured. He is in full sympathy with the South, and will follow up his present advantage to the bitter end. Let the people nerve themselves to do what they can. They can and will save the government; but there is great danger of a repetition of the mistakes and delays and dreadful disasters of the first stage of this war. There is great danger of a kid-glove campaign under some political McClellan.

Could the people be made to feel that the assassins of President Lincoln are now the honored guests of the White House—that this veto is a part of the murderous programme—Northern Copperheads would not insult a loyal people by their insolent

rejoicings, and the traitors of the South would stand aghast before their indignation.<sup>14</sup>

With no clerkship there could be no *Reconstructionist*, and that rocket burned itself out forthwith. Nevertheless, it had scattered its sparks, which flickered out in comments of the editorial variety all over the country.

Worn in body and in mind, Mrs. Swisshelm left Washington for Pittsburgh, where a long lawsuit brought her the old farm at Swissvale and eventually a competence which lasted the rest of her days. St. Cloud, Chicago, and Swissvale, as well as the trains of the Pennsylvania railroad running into Pittsburgh, were favored with her presence during these latter years. While in Chicago, she passed much of her time with the widow of President Lincoln, for the two women seem to have had much in common. These final nineteen years of her life were marked by no extraordinary public activity unless one so reckons an occasional contribution to the *Chicago Tribune*; apparently her life work was done. Her constructive—or was it destructive?—task was completed. Visiting her daughter in Chicago, gossiping with Mrs. Lincoln, or merely sitting quietly at the door of the old house at Swissvale watching the trains go by and gazing at the trees she had planted in earlier years, filled her hours with ample employment, although toward the end of her days she wrote, from memory—for she had destroyed all letters and other documents for fear they would be used for evil purposes—an account of her life down to the closing days of the war. A surcease of labor filled her with a calm content, so that the white-haired woman who made friends with the brakeman of the Pittsburgh local no longer strove to remodel the world. Her day was past. New problems no longer drove her into the noisy conflict of a world trying to forget the war and its causes. The slavery she knew was no more; the south might struggle on, undisturbed by her, toward the dawn of a brighter life.

LESTER BURRELL SHIPPEE

UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA  
MINNEAPOLIS, MINNESOTA

<sup>14</sup> From the *Reconstructionist*, quoted in the *St. Paul Pioneer*, March 6, 1866.